Ozark-St. Francis National Forests'

Ozark Vegetation Management Project

Project Description

Introduction

The Ozark-St. Francis National Forests (Forests) are proposing to complete a landscape level analysis of vegetation management on the Ozark National Forest. The Forests have a need to conduct vegetation management at a broader scale, utilizing silvicultural practices to accomplish restoration goals for the Ozark National Forest. In addition, the Forests are proposing a plan amendment to the 2005 Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) following the direction in the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219). This amendment would update Appendix F of the Forest Plan to better reflect the silvicultural practices needed to manage the diverse ecological conditions and management areas on the Ozark National Forest.

Vegetation management actions are critically important to fulfilling the Forest Service mission to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. These actions are designed to restore and maintain healthy, resilient forests capable of delivering all the benefits people need from them: clean air and water, carbon sequestration, habitat for native fish and wildlife, forest products, opportunities for outdoor recreation, and more. The purpose of conducting an analysis on a forest-wide scale is to more effectively support maintaining and enhancing forest ecosystem functions needed for productive and resilient forests to support communities and economies.

Vegetation management activities associated with Timber, Silviculture, Wildlife, and Fire programs on the Ozark National Forest will be within the scope of analysis. Connected actions, such as road maintenance or reconstruction, temporary road construction, and construction and maintenance of firelines, associated with the vegetation management actions, are also within the scope of this analysis. The project will broadly review all lands within the Ozark National Forest and authorize vegetation management actions to achieve the goals of the Forest Plan. The analysis will include Forest Service lands within the administrative boundaries of the Ozark National Forest. An analysis covering these types of activities was recently completed on the St. Francis National Forest. Therefore, activities on the St. Francis will not be covered under this proposal.

Background

In 2005, the Forest Plan identified the need to make progress in the following priority areas: 1) reduce forest health threats, including oak decline, non-native species, native insects, and high fuel loading, 2) restore open, fire-maintained ecosystems based on historic reference conditions, 3) reduce overstocked conditions in oak and pine forest types and improve age class distribution, and 4) protect and restore special ecological communities, such as glades and canebrakes. Substantial progress has been made toward these goals, however, many of the oak and pine woodland areas are overstocked and encroached on by cedar or other fire-intolerant species, the early succession forest condition is under-represented, and many special ecological areas are still in a degraded condition across the landscape.

Open habitats are critically important for once abundant species like Bobwhite quail, prairie warbler, and spotted skunk. Many species, including Eastern Wild Turkey, benefit substantially from habitat responses to fire disturbance in a matrix with unburned areas. Plant communities have also been shown to have positive responses to silvicultural and prescribed fire treatments. Some areas have been restored to historic open-forest conditions through the use of thinning or other silviculture methods in combination with prescribed fire. However, the scale of restored habitats has not been sufficient to restore the wildlife populations dependent upon those habitats to the extent desired.

This project proposes to improve the efficiency of project planning and update the prescriptions and methods used to meet the desired conditions described in the Forest Plan. This would include multiple types of vegetation management, such as timber harvest, understory thinning, wildlife opening maintenance, and prescribed fire, to help restore natural ecological communities and wildlife populations that have declined due to the loss of many of the unique habitats that were once abundant on the Forests.

Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

The purpose of the Ozark Vegetation Management (OVM) Project is to restore native ecosystems, improve habitat, and improve resilience against environmental stressors across the landscape and to modernize the vegetation management prescriptions outlined in Appendix F of the Forest Plan.

There is a need to update and improve forest vegetation management implementation to address existing forest conditions. The project is needed to: 1) enhance and/or maintain diverse ecological communities across the landscape; 2) ensure benefits provided by the Ozark National Forest, such as forest products, access, and visual quality, are sustained for future generations; 3) enable timely and effective responses to disturbance events; 4) revise

prescriptions in Appendix F of the Forest Plan; and 5) increase efficiency in applying vegetation treatments on the ground based on site conditions.

Addressing these needs will allow forest management activities to keep pace with dynamic and evolving forest conditions, address ecological community needs at broader landscape levels, and update vegetation management practices based on the past 15 years of forest management experience under the current Forest Plan. Landscape-scale planning and updated vegetation prescriptions will provide flexibility to manage for evolving and dynamic ecological conditions and ensure that productive and resilient forests continue to support local communities and economies.

Proposed Action

Conditions change quickly, often before an environmental analysis can be completed for a given area. These changes can be due to disturbances from weather events, insect and disease outbreaks, and other unforeseen events, which can easily make months of analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) invalid. Managers then have to start again with a new process. A landscape scale analysis and approach is one way to efficiently prepare and react to these events by covering a larger area.

In any given year, National Forests can be in various phases of the NEPA process for approximately eight to ten environmental assessments (EAs). These EAs are typically 10,000-50,000 acres in size, focused on vegetation management, and include various other non-vegetation management activities. Over the years of completing these project specific analyses and monitoring plans, land managers have been able to reduce the unknowns regarding effects of these vegetation management activities upon the various resources. Using this knowledge and experience, effects to the resources from vegetation treatments can now be anticipated across a much larger landscape.

Though most activities on the Ozark National Forest have been planned on a smaller scale, with NEPA analysis for individual projects, the OVM project is a bit different. This analysis will integrate the planning framework and environmental effects analysis for several projects into one decision, to accelerate the pace and scale of active forest management. Analyzing vegetation management at a landscape level is intended to authorize adaptive management of forest vegetation using a range of proposed activities described in the following section.

The Proposed Action is organized into three elements: Activities, Areas, and Monitoring and Implementation.

Activities

The OVM Project would authorize an average of 33,500 acres of vegetation treatments along with an average of 120,000 acres of prescribed burning to continue on the Ozark National Forest annually (Table 1). These activities and amounts are within the guidelines set by the Forest Plan.

Actions associated with timber extraction from treatment units would also be implemented as needed. These may include construction of log landings, skid trails, and temporary roads as well as maintenance and reconstruction of system roads.

TABLE 1. Average number of acres to be treated annually

Proposed Treatment Categories	Commercial Thinning	Regeneration Harvest	Timber Stand Improvement	Wildlife (Habitat) Stand Improvement	Wildlife Opening Maintenance	Planting	Prescribed Burning
Implementation by Treatment Category (Average/Year)	9,400 acres	3,100 acres	9,000 acres	6,000 acres	3,000 acres	3,000 acres	120,000 acres

A description of these activities follows:

COMMERCIAL THINNING

This treatment category would include prescriptions for commercial thinning as well as group selection, single tree selection, salvage or sanitation harvest, restoration thinning, and a prescription prioritizing Indiana bat habitat (proposed prescriptions 101, 105, 110, 116, 117, 118, and 127 – see Table 2, referenced in Plan Amendment section).

REGENERATION HARVEST

This treatment category would include prescriptions for seedtree, seedtree with reserves, shelterwood, shelterwood with reserves, clearcut, and clearcut with reserves (proposed prescriptions 100, 107, and 115 – see Table 2).

TIMBER STAND IMPROVEMENT

Target vegetation for these treatments would be woody species (except federally or Regional Forester's sensitive listed species) that are competing with selected dominant and co-dominant stems or young regeneration.

Handtools, mechanical equipment, or herbicide applications may be used individually or in combination to conduct release, pre-commercial thinning, and/or site preparation actions (proposed prescriptions 119, 120, and 121 – see Table 2).

WILDLIFE (HABITAT) STAND IMPROVEMENT

These treatments may include felling trees and/or woody stems, girdling trees to create snags; use of prescribed fire, and mulching. Trees exhibiting roost tree characteristics, den trees and trees that produce mast (hard and soft) would be favored as leave trees.

Most of the trees cut for this treatment would be left on the ground, but where accessible, felled stems could be sold as small diameter wood products or firewood or utilized as biomass.

Handtools, mechanical equipment, or herbicide applications may be used individually or in combination to conduct wildlife (habitat) stand improvement actions (proposed prescriptions 122, 123, and 126 – see Table 2).

WILDLIFE OPENING MAINTENANCE

A prescription would be developed for current wildlife openings to reduce encroachment and develop plant communities which provide optimal forage and cover for livestock and wildlife species.

This treatment would allow for the removal of vegetation via manual, mechanical, or chemical means to maintain existing wildlife openings (proposed prescription 124 – see Table 2).

PLANTING

The planting of native woody or non-woody species would be employed to reach desired stocking levels and/or to reestablish native vegetation in areas where lost (proposed prescription 125 – see Table 2).

PRESCRIBED BURNING

Prescribed burning would be utilized to support the described vegetation treatments as well as to provide for fuel reduction, and health and safety for employees and the public.

Treatments would be prioritized to restore fire’s role as an ecological process that is an essential tool for creating and maintaining functional ecosystems (proposed prescription 128 – see Table 2).

Areas

As provided for in 36 CFR 219.4(a)(4), the national forests and grasslands are suitable for a variety of uses except when specific areas are determined not to be suitable. For activities planned under this analysis, the forest has been divided into four distinct groupings. These groupings start with areas that are excluded due mostly to resource concerns, continue through areas with progressively less restrictions, and up to areas with minimal restrictions on suitable activities. Activities for all areas would follow standards established in the Forest Plan or per other policy, law or regulations. These groupings are listed and described below:

Excluded Areas and Areas Not Covered By This Analysis

- No activities would be proposed for the following areas under this proposal.
- These include:
    - Waterbodies
    - Borrow Pits
    - Management Areas
        - 1.A - Wilderness
        - 1.B - Recommended Wilderness Additions
        - 1.C - Designated Wild and Scenic Rivers
            - Wild Sections
        - 1.F - Research Natural Areas
    - Areas covered by the St. Francis National Forest Ecosystem Restoration Project

Limited Activities: Areas Unsuitable for Timber Production

- Activities would be limited to improvement of existing conditions, enhancing or sustaining scenic or other values or restoration work to improve habitat.
- Activities may include commercial thinning not associated with timber production, wildlife (habitat) stand improvement, wildlife opening maintenance, prescribed burning, and associated roadwork and firelines.
- These include:
    - Utility Line Corridors
    - Inventoried Roadless Areas
    - Trail of Tears National Historic Trail Corridor
    - Management Areas
        - 1.C - Designated Wild and Scenic Rivers
            - Scenic Sections
            - Recreational Sections
        - 1.D - Recommended Wild and Scenic Rivers
        - 1.E - Experimental Forests

        - 1.G - Special Interest Areas
        - 2.A - Ozark Highlands Trail Corridor
        - 2.B - State Parks
        - 2.C - Developed Recreation Areas
        - 3.J - Pastures and Large Wildlife Opening

Limited Activities: Areas Suitable for Timber Production

- Activities may include commercial thinning, timber stand improvement, wildlife (habitat) stand improvement, planting, prescribed burning, and associated roadwork and firelines.
- These include:
    - Trails
    - Areas with a Slope greater than 35%
    - Management Areas
        - 1.H - Scenic Byway Corridors
        - 3.I - Riparian Corridors

All Activities: Areas Suitable for Timber Production

- All of the activities proposed in this analysis could be implemented including commercial thinning, regeneration harvest, timber stand improvement, wildlife (habitat) stand improvement, planting, prescribed burning, and associated roadwork and firelines.
- These include:
    - Management Areas
        - 2.D - Upper Buffalo Dispersed Recreation Area
        - 2.E - Wedington Unit Urban Recreation Area
        - 2.F - Indian Creek Dispersed Recreation Area
        - 3.A - Pine Woodland
        - 3.B - Oak Woodland
        - 3.C - Mixed Forest
        - 3.D - Oak Decline Restoration Areas
        - 3.E - High Quality Forest Products
        - 3.F - Old Growth Area
        - 3.K - Wildlife Emphasis Areas

Maps 1-4 (attached) show the areas that would be included in each grouping.

Monitoring and Implementation

The purpose of developing a monitoring and implementation plan is to outline the process for proposing, reviewing, and implementing vegetation management treatments and to define the required monitoring elements to track that the project implementation is effective in meeting the goals of the Forest plan. Because specific vegetation management actions will be determined by on the ground conditions, the implementation and monitoring plan are an integral part of this project proposal. This plan will have three main focus areas:

- Design a specific implementation strategy for vegetation management treatments being applied over the project area. This would include:
    - Establish a process to ensure all clearances (Heritage, Biological, etc.) are complete prior to work on the ground
    - Provide checklists for vegetation management work within certain management areas with specific considerations and mitigations to ensure compliance
    - Ensure this project is implemented consistently across the Ozark National Forest

- Formulate a design to inform the public and our partners throughout the implementation of this project by:
    - Providing a forum for interested public and partners to stay informed about this project and implementation of ongoing ground treatments
    - Providing a mechanism to inform interested parties of upcoming treatment plans
    - Serving as a tracking system for implementation of treatments under this analysis

- Establish a monitoring protocol based on parameters/standards established by incorporating Best Management Practices and Design Elements from this analysis and the Forest Plan to:
    - Document specific monitoring requirements for vegetation management activities, including methods, data needs, reporting, and triggering thresholds where appropriate
    - Track treatment activities and report accomplishments to the public and partners on a recurring basis
    - Serve as an accountability mechanism with the public, our partners, and other entities for mitigations that are being applied

Updated/proposed prescriptions found in Appendix F would be selected that would best move each community toward the desired conditions. The Forests would develop decision trees or flow charts to help guide what treatments can be used to bring each stand or area to the desired

condition as described by the Forest Plan for that type of community. Community types for the Ozark National Forest are shown at a broad scale in an attached map (Map 5).

As each treatment is planned, initial treatment activities would be chosen depending on which area the treatment is located in. Then, the type of treatment would be further refined by the decision tree and the appropriate prescription from the modified Appendix F. All of this would be informed by conditions found on the ground and would include stand density, stocking, age and health of trees.

Where desired conditions do not exist, treatments will be prescribed to move toward them. Where desired conditions already exist, treatments will be prescribed, if necessary, to maintain them. The transportation system in the area will be assessed to determine which, if any, roads would require maintenance or reconstruction to facilitate treatments.

Once the planned treatments are ready for implementation, no further analysis under NEPA would be completed since the effects will have been analyzed under this proposal and previously by the Forest Plan. The Forest is working to develop a protocol to engage the public as treatments are planned and then applied. Appropriate Tribal notification and consultation would also occur prior to implementation. Treatments within an area would then be applied over the following 2-5 years. The goal is to expedite activity completion while still informing the public, stakeholders, Tribes, and other partners.

The Forests would also develop a mechanism to report accomplishments of these treatments back to the public. Finally, the results of these treatments would be monitored and feedback from that monitoring would inform the next set of treatments planned.

Forest Plan Amendment

Experience on the ground along with the results of the 2020 Biennial Monitoring Evaluation Report for the Forests identified a need to increase pace and scale of treatments being applied on the ground. There is a need to become more efficient, spending less time analyzing similar treatments at a small scale and more time implementing the direction in the Forest Plan.

In order to respond to this need effectively, it is necessary to update the prescriptions developed in Appendix F of the Forest Plan through a programmatic Forest Plan amendment. Existing prescriptions would be updated to provide more flexibility in residual basal area requirements and new prescriptions would be developed to cover more treatment types and vegetation communities. These proposed changes to are summarized in Table 2: Proposed Forest Plan Amendment Changes to Prescriptions in Appendix F (attached).

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires the Forest Service to develop land management plans to guide management of the National Forests. The 2012 Planning Rule as amended directs this land use planning process.

The 2012 Planning Rule requires the notification of which of the substantive rule requirements for sustainability, plant and animal diversity, multiple uses, and timber (36 CFR 219.8-219.11) are likely to be directly related to the plan direction being changed by the amendment.

A specific substantive requirement is “directly related” to the amendment based on the purpose of the amendment, and if the NEPA documentation reveals substantial adverse effects associated with the requirement; or the amendment would substantially lessen protections for a specific resource or use.

For this plan amendment, the requirements relating to sustainability, plant and animal diversity, multiple uses, and timber (36 CFR 219.8-219.11) are all rule requirements that may be directly related to the plan direction being changed.

Decision to be Made

In this decision, the Responsible Official will answer the following questions:

- Will the proposed action and plan amendment proceed as proposed, as modified by an alternative, or not at all?
- Are there any substantial adverse effects associated the proposed amendment or would there be any substantial lessening of resource protections?
- Will any additional conservation measures and/or monitoring requirements be needed?

Responsible Official

The Responsible Official for this environmental analysis and associated plan amendment will be the Forest Supervisor for the Ozark- St. Francis National Forests.

Project Schedule

The Forest Service expects to analyze this project under an environmental assessment which would be available for public comment in 2021. The Forest Service is planning to analyze the effects of this project during the winter and spring of 2021 and release the draft environmental assessment in the summer or fall of 2021.

The environmental assessment will include public involvement to date, disclosure of issues and alternative development, and an effects analysis. The environmental document would be

provided to those who have submitted comments and who have requested to be included on the project mailing list.

The Forest Service expects to issue a decision in the winter of 2021 and implementation could begin in 2022.

Attachments

Table 2

Maps 1-5